

Longthorpe Church

Sunday 9th January 2022 - The Baptism of Christ

A Sermon by Pat Hemsley, Licensed Lay Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

There's a technique used quite often both in film and television drama, and in fictional writing, which is the flash-back ...or the flash forward. You know the idea: things don't happen chronologically, but incidents either in the past, or in the future, are shown seemingly in random order, giving some sort of hint about what the end might be. For the viewer or the reader, it's as if the story is being given in pieces, like a jigsaw. The result may clarify or mystify, but even if we're confused, the hints we're given usually heighten the tension, and make us more eager to understand the whole when it's properly assembled and revealed.

I sometimes think the liturgical order of New Testament readings are presented in a similar way; we don't read about Jesus' life in a chronological sequence. After the Lenten period, we hear of his death, resurrection and ascension and then comes the "ordinary" season when we return to his active ministry. Advent teaches us to prepare for Jesus' birth, but also his second coming and we've no sooner celebrated that than we arrive in this season of Epiphany when things really do seem to bob back and forth. Last week, Jesus was a baby, being honoured by the visit of the magi and the gifts they brought; in a couple of weeks, we shall remember how, as a baby, his parents presented him in the Temple as custom demanded. But in the intervening weeks, we flash forward to Jesus, the adult and see him at a wedding with his mother and today, with John the Baptist at his baptism. What is going on?

However confusing this may be, it is intriguing and presents us with the challenge of looking for hints and clues as we seek to understand. Our readings today are all like fragmented pieces of a puzzle, but together they carry an amazing message. The gospel reading puts Jesus side by side with John the Baptist, as they have been metaphorically since their conception. But it is John that the crowd know and are flocking to see. Even though we know who Jesus is, they don't. Even though we see in Jesus the physical manifestation of God's love to the world, they don't. John knows his role is as messenger to one who will be greater than him, but up to now, has he recognised Jesus as that person?

Jesus, as the son of a carpenter, comes with many others to receive John's message of repentance. He hasn't yet begun his ministry and he hasn't yet started on the painful road that will lead to the cross. He's done nothing that might earn

the words that God speaks out, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God’s love is given to Jesus not because of any action on his part; it’s given simply because of who he is....God’s own Son.

The people in the Nativity story, the shepherds, the kings, were given signs of Jesus’ relationship with God, but now that relationship is revealed to a wider audience—to John and to those with him on the river-bank – and it’s affirmed by a visible sign, that of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. This is a wonderful moment of confirmation when God declares his unconditional love for Jesus and the interaction between God, the Son and the Holy Spirit is made known.

The second reading from Acts is a “flash forward”, taking us further into the future of the story. It shows a Christian community who have followed the tradition of baptism, recognising it as an important step in discipleship, but until Peter and John were able to confirm that baptism by the laying-on of hands, the transformational effect of the gift of the Holy Spirit had not been experienced. Simon, sometimes referred to as Simon Magus, although an influential figure within that community, had somehow not received the confirmation, but he witnessed the miraculous changes in those he knew and wanting that power, he asked Peter to sell it to him for money. He wasn’t so much interested in the gift of the Spirit as in the power of being able to give it.

We don’t know what happened to Simon, but the incident teaches us that Peter understood that God’s love and its confirming gift of the Holy Spirit is not within human control. There is no earning of it, no means of buying it; neither Peter, nor John, nor Simon, nor any human being then, since, or now can do anything other than be open to God’s love and what he wants for us. Jesus’ baptism and subsequent ministry is about the love of the Father who sent him and the Holy Spirit who keeps that love an ever-present reality. Christian baptism is baptism into the loving community of God.

This causes us to pause and to reflect on our own baptisms, which, (if they happened when we were babies) are probably occasions that few of us remember. We can, however, rejoice that they marked the beginning of our journey of discipleship and for many of us, our baptism was confirmed at a later ceremony, performed by a bishop, by the laying on of hands. At that moment prayers were offered for the Holy Spirit to come upon us, just as it came upon Jesus. Sceptics may assume that these moments are empty, old pieces of ritual, but as a counter-balance to that claim, there are too many remarkable stories of how people’s lives have been transformed, of what God has worked through them, to brush aside the power of the Spirit.

Taking another jump through time, but now backwards, the wonderful reading from Isaiah teaches us that each of us are called, through our own baptisms, to hear the same message from God that Jesus heard at his. We have nothing to fear

for, says God, “I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.” We are created by God for his glory and that is why he redeems us, that is why he gave us his son to show us the way. All the pieces, all past, present and future glimpses fall into place to make one whole glorious message to take us forward on our journey. God chooses to redeem us not because we are worthy, but because inexplicably, he loves us. “You are my child, the beloved; in you I am well pleased”.

Amen